Identifying and Evaluating Historic Corridors and Trails

Jere L. Krakow

This brief paper will address identification and evaluation of resources associated with historic transportation corridors and trails. The underlying assumption here is that some individual or interest group has advocated recognition of such a transportation resource. What should be the response of a land managing agency or organization? I would urge a holistic approach involving not only history, but archeology, ethnology, geography, architecture, and landscape architecture.

The most important and basic direction is to establish the historical context for the corridor. This will establish its significance and guide further decisions about placing it in a special category of a nation's heritage, and, therefore, whether it is deserving of protection and preservation. As a result, it may be designated a historic trail or heritage corridor.

Historical context is determined through a survey of literature, principally secondary sources. Histories of the nation, state, region and locality are consulted to identify the chronology, themes, and topics of the transportation corridor. For instance, it would underscore social, political or economic history of a nation, and explicate themes and periods of history such as native populations, nationhood, expansion and internal conflicts. Sub-themes related to transportation, commerce, trade, agriculture, or others would also be identified.

As a result of this survey, the historical context may be determined, and the historical significance of the transportation corridor or trail assessed. This is a fundamental assessment useful in feasibility studies which often lead to enabling legislation for new parks, a database for planning, the initiation of a historic resource study, and the nomination of the corridor or trail to a state inventory, the National Register, or for National Historic Landmark designation, and even nomination to the World Heritage List. Other uses often relate to interpreting the resource to the visiting public, data for promotional and educational literature, and the beginnings of a site inventory.

Following a determination of context and significance, mapping of the route and inventorying the sites along it are important steps to take. To do this, however, it is necessary to locate primary sources—first-hand accounts related to the corridor under consideration. Research must locate journals, diaries, and first person accounts which bear on the study area. Repositories and private collections need to be located and researched for such materials. Historical maps such as those done for land surveys, and exploration are valuable resources; painting, drawings, sketches, historic photographs, and aerial photographs as diverse as those taken by the Soil Conservation Service and NASA will also fill in important details. This information begins to flesh out detail about the corridor.

A number of secondary sources related to the corridor also need to be uncovered. These may include studies done by professionals in fields such as archeology, ethnography, geography, and history. Government agency reports and those from state or local governments, foundations, and contracted studies need to be examined for information. State inventories, nomination forms from the National Register of Historic Places, and reports from the Historic American Buildings Survey / Historic American Engineering Record (HABS / HAER) also supplement the database being gathered.

Another very important source of information is the field survey of the resource. Driving the corridor and walking portions of it provide important and innumerable pieces of information about the landscape. The physical setting and the cultural layers put on it by occupants from the beginning to the present are very important. If a similar landscape exists elsewhere from the study area it can be valuable to visit it. Renowned geographer Carl O. Sauer, native of Missouri and longtime professor at the University of California, put it in perspective when he urged that to understand the American Southwest, we travel to and study Mexico's northern states. The same lesson is conveyed by other geographers: D.W. Meinig, Terry Jordan, John Jakle, and Erhard Rostlund.

Field work immediately allows a researcher to size up the viewsheds of the corridor, the landscape, especially the cultural landscape component, and the successive layering of occupants. Site inventory forms and photographs completed on site will secure added documentation. With knowledge gained from traditional print sources, the on-site visit becomes the proverbial learning experience. One can see the built environment, road alignments, trail ruts, and the ensemble of fences, fields, wood lots, farmsteads, roads, windbreaks and development zones.

A very important aspect of the field work is to arrange for time with local informants and experts. Often they provide local literature, oral tradition, and a community memory. It adds a dimension to the database that often is dismissed as of little importance. Of course one always seeks to corroborate the information with other sources. Experience shows that local residents know a great deal, and often provide links to others who add further to the knowledge base about the corridor or trail.

Visiting the corridor reveals the threats to resources due to development pressures, road realignments, construction of bridges where ferries presently exist, and other potential impacts on historic resources. Viewing the landscape also permits mapping of protection areas where change has been minimal since the period of historic significance. Some degree of protection may be achieved through zoning, easements, covenants, or purchase in fee simple.

The evaluation of resources along historic transportation corridors and trails is thus predicated on sound knowledge. Research from a multi-disciplinary approach is necessary to accomplish this. A level of significance is determined. All historic resources contribute to the whole. Some may have more associative importance and integrity of site or resource than others. Once a substan-

*(**Krakow**—continued on page 20)*

(***Watson***—*continued from page 19)*

Wyoming. This replica was built by a local historical society.

But the most important landmark of the entire trail was Independence Rock, a popular camping spot for the wagon trains. There are numerous reports of July 4th celebrations being held here. The view from the top of Independence Rock shows the Sweetwater River as it flows east from South Pass. Equally impressive was Devil's Gap, on private land in Wyoming. The Sun Ranch has received an OCTA Friend Of the Trail award for preservation efforts here. At South Pass, crossed by every wagon headed west, the 1906 Oregon Trail marker was erected by Ezra Meeker when he retraced the trail in reverse. It is on private land and the Hay brothers received a Friend Of the Trail award last August for preservation of this site.

A second marker at South Pass honors Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spalding, mid-1830s missionary wives and the first white women to cross the Rockies. Nearby is Pacific Springs, the first point after South Pass where the water flows west. It is also on private land. A few miles further west is the Charlotte Danzie Grave, preserved by descendants but marked with an OCTA interpretive sign.

Fort Bridger on Black's fork of Green River is another NPS site. A few miles away is the Daniel Lantz grave with protective pole fence and interpretive sign installed by OCTA's Graves and Sites Committee.

In Utah, Emigration Canyon was opened by the Donner party in 1846, as this company attempted to follow the route later known as the Hastings Cut-off. It was used by the Mormons in 1847 to reach Salt Lake. City of Rocks in Idaho is another spectacular site. These are Steeple Rocks. OCTA worked with the BLM to have this area designated a National Reserve. The California Trail from Salt Lake rejoins the Fort Hall trail in City of Rocks.

The Humboldt Sink and the Forty Mile Desert in Nevada presented a major obstacle for emigrants. At this point those taking the Truckee-Donner route went to the right. OCTA worked closely with Rick Burns while he produced the Donner Party documentary shown on PBS. Wagons taking the Carson Route took the left-hand fork across the desert.

The Carson Canyon on the Nevada-California border is part of Forest Service land. The trail crossed the Carson River three times in this rugged canyon before reaching Hope Valley. Thanks to cooperative cattle ranchers and former Congressman Norman Shumway this beautiful and historic valley is now a National Reserve administered by the Forest Service.

At Red Lake the trail begins the first ascent of the Sierra Nevada mountains. The trail here is partly on private land as well as on Forest Service land. Most emigrants camped at the lake to rest up for the climb. A cobbled wagon road was paved with small stones by emigrants to make it easier to follow the trail up the Devil's Ladder. Contents of each wagon plus the canvas top were hauled up on the backs of the animals. Then the empty wagon was double-teamed to pull it up the mountain. Pioneers also used rocks to build up the down-hill side of the wagon road.

The first summit for the pioneers was the Carson Pass, today the summit of Highway 88. A Forest Service interpretive center, being built here by volunteers, is to be dedicated on National Trails Day, June 5, 1993.

Caples Lake in pioneer times was a grassy valley with two streams running through it at the base of the second summit. Most wagon trains camped overnight in the meadow. After the brush had been cleared on our adopted segment of the trail, ruts were clearly visible while more ruts still exist along the final climb to Covered Wagon Summit, the gateway to California.

West Pass, at 9,600' elevation, is the highest point in the U.S. that the covered wagons rolled. The rail marker was erected in 1970 by the Nevada Historical Society and is now maintained by a private trail group. From West Pass the dirt road, on top of the old emigrant trail, is now maintained by a wheel drive club.

Identifying, marking and preserving the emigrant trails involves many people and many different organizations, both public and private. For many of us it is a labor of love and I have enjoyed taking you on this armchair trip by covered wagon over our Historic Transportation Corridor to California.

William C. Watson is past president of the Oregon-California Trails Association.

(***Krakow***—*continued from page 14)*

tial amount of research is completed, then one can begin the evaluation of resources along the corridor.

A body of literature does exist to aid in evaluation. In particular, the National Register of Historic Places has very helpful staff and publications to give insight, advice, and opinion about this. Likewise, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and the State Historic Preservation Officer provide assistance on evaluation of sites. HABS/HAER provides information through staff and publications which assist in evaluation.

The National Trails Act of 1968, as amended in 1978 to include historic trails, supplements criteria for evaluation too. In sum, there are many sources of criteria useful in evaluating a transportation corridor and individual sites and historic resources along it.

Finally, data gathering through research should not be given short shrift. It is fundamental in order to establish overall historic significance, and for completing an inventory and evaluation of the corridor. The traveling public now and in the future will be the better informed for it.

Dr. Jere Krakow is a historian with the Denver Service Center, National Park Service.